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ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper notes the tremendous number of approaches to teaching writing, the agreement among experts that writing involves developmental stages specific to each student, and the need for writing programs that challenge individuals at their various levels of development. The paper then describes a newly revised writing course for academically underprepared freshmen entering the University of Georgia. The course includes both structured and unstructured writing activities; an adjunctive English laboratory provides special tutoring for students when necessary. Results after two quarters indicate that the course has helped students to improve their basic English skills. The final section of the paper airs doubts about remedial writing courses that focus narrowly on the goal of producing "perfect" compositions and suggests that college composition courses should promote a vision of a better world, with the three R's--revisions, renovations, and revolutions--as the basis. (GW)

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C. Angelia Moore

TEACHING WRITING TO THE UNPREPARED: THE THREE R'S[1]

In recent years I have heard and read many criticisms of students' ability to write. These criticisms have been based on the decline in SAT scores, on the significant decline in quality writing by students on the National Assessment Test in writing, on comments by freshman English teachers, by industry, by teachers, by parents, and by almost anybody who cares to comment. And in the face of this criticism, composition teachers have become defensive. We talk about the many reasons for the decline in writing skills other than our teaching. I believe that we have justifiable reasons for placing the blame for the decline on outside forces, but I don't think that helps our students to write better. I think we would be better off to spend our energy looking for ways to improve writing skills.

In an ERIC/RCS interview, William Lutz and Edward White said that composition teachers need to become more professional.[2] We need to demand that composition courses in college do not become a dumping ground, that skilled English faculty teach these courses, and that we require more writing for enjoyment. The old conventions of the back to basics movement have not taught students to write. We need to teach writing as a human activity, as a means of self expression.

In the last 10 years I have faithfully followed the visions many experts have contributed to our knowledge of writing. I have

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[1]This speech was given at the Conference on English Education, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 25, 1977

[2]Daniel J. Dieterich, "The Decline in Students' Writing Skills: An ERIC/RCS Interview," College English, 38 (Jan. 1977), 466-472.

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followed the models approach and sequencing of expository writing by Roberts, Tate and Corbett, Cohen, McCrimmon, and Upton. I have studied the new inventional systems of Young and Pike, Wallace and D'Angelo. The form and style approach of Christensen, Winterowd, and Becker. I have learned from psychologists such as Wallas, Bruner, Skinner, Piaget, and Bloom. I have studied Audience theory from Rogers, Burke, and Moffett. Langer, Sontag, and Read have added the philosopher's point of view to my knowledge. Research in transformational syntax and its effects on writing have been explored by Hunt, O'Donnell, Bateman and Zidonis, O'Hare, Mellon, Strong, Ward, Combs, and Perron. Emig, Rohman, Zoellner, and Britton have taught me about the composing process. I have tried reflexive or free writing, advocated by Jenkinson and Macrorie. Judy taught me to experiment with freedom and structure in writing. In evaluation, I studied Braddock, Diederich, Veal, and Cooper. And finally, I read the theories of discourse by Moffett and Kinneavy. All of these approaches or visions have worked sometimes with some students, but my quest for the one best method that would work all the time with the unprepared students in remedial programs was not to be found. In fact very little research has been completed with the remedial writer. It is time for us to look at the common factors of all these experts and revise remedial programs to synthesize these visions to meet the needs of our particular students.

We know that the acquisition of writing skills parallels language development in general. We know that students must acquire fluency before we impose grammatical conventions and the editing process. We

know that our students need methods aimed at reducing anxiety. We know that their oral language is more highly developed than their writing skills and that this oral language is full of generalizations rather than "specific supporting details." We know that we must deal with all modes of writing and that all writing is imaginative and creative. We need to use all that we know rather than expect one approach to solve all the problems in teaching writing. One thing all our visionaries tell us is that writing is developmental. It involves stages followed by quantum leaps in competence and understanding. Rarely is their development as writers a linear process. Our students reach these stages and take these leaps in their own time, not ours. We have to develop writing programs which will challenge each individual at his various levels of development.

I'm sure that many of you remember the advice of Herndon about teaching reading in How To Survive in Your Native Land.[3] He said that before you begin you should read everything relevant to what you are doing and throw the rest away. These odd bits of knowledge which seem useful should be tried and revised every day according to what's happening in the classroom. Although my entire teaching career in the public schools has been teaching the slow, the disadvantaged, the unprepared, or whatever you want to call them, I decided to take Herndon's advice last September when I accepted my job as head of Special Studies English. I read as much as I could about

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[3]James Herndon, How To Survive in Your Native Land (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 139-140.

Special Studies programs between preparing for my four composition courses and finishing my dissertation. One paper by Cameron Fincher helped shape the development of our program at the University of Georgia.[4] Dr. Fincher summarized the criticisms of Remedial, Developmental, or Special Studies programs, and two of those criticisms seemed directed toward the problems I wanted to avoid. First, he said that "progress in Special Studies programs is seldom the linear process that optimists expect it to be. There is a lack of convincing evidence that compensatory education is effective in the sense of producing consistent, permanent results."[5] Secondly, he said that "skills taught have not been applicable to the demands of coursework in the formal, traditional classroom. The elimination of specific deficiencies in capitalization, spelling, and grammatical structure do not readily transfer to the student's written assignments in Freshman English or other courses."[6] Well, I knew that in spite of research evidence I was expected to take my students from the incompetent writers they were to competent writers of Freshman English, writers who performed consistently in Standard American English. I wasn't sure I could do this for two reasons. First, I didn't know who my students were. And secondly, I wasn't sure I wanted to teach them to write Freshman Engfish. Nevertheless, my staff of three bright graduate students and I began to renovate the Special Studies English program, and we continue to renovate at the end of each quarter. I speak of renovation not in terms of restoring to a former condition but in terms of reviving.

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[4]"The Past and Future of Special Studies Programs," Paper presented at Reading Conference for Georgia Colleges, Georgia Center for Continuing Education, November 19, 1973.

[5]Ibid., p. 5

[6]Ibid., p. 6

The University of Georgia has two Freshman English courses, Eng. 101 and 102. About 60% of the entering Freshmen begin at the Eng. 101 level. The University also has a remedial English course, Eng. 100, and last year 40% of the entering Freshmen were placed in that course as a result of their scores on the Freshman English Placement Test, a departmental test. We also have the Special Studies English program. This program has been in junior colleges in Georgia for a number of years, but began at the University of Georgia just last year by order of the University Board of Regents. Our students are special admissions students because they have low grade point averages, low SAT scores, or both. We accept about 200 students every fall; however, some of these students exit Special Studies by passing the CGP - Comparative Guidance Placement Test - a Regents requirement, without ever taking one of our courses. For the students who remain, we offer a one to four quarter course in writing.

The population of students enrolled is a fairly broad cross-section, representative of a growing number of high school students graduated with the label "deficient" in writing skills. Within our population, these deficiencies -- dialect differences, spelling problems, non-standard grammatical usage, and general lack of fluency -- range from severe to moderate. The common factors among most of the students are a willingness to try anything and a hope that miracles still exist, that they will exit Special Studies, do well on the English Placement Test, and get into Eng. 101. Therefore, we are forced to look to diversity in approaches for the strength of our program, those odd bits of knowledge gleamed from philosophers, rhetoricians, and linguists.

Our approaches to teaching writing are both structured and unstructured. The unstructured writing activities are designed to give the student an opportunity to write freely from his own emotions and experiences, to give the student an opportunity to explore his creative faculties, to give the student ample opportunity to develop fluency, and to give him an opportunity to overcome the fear of expressing himself in writing. The structured writing activities are designed to give the student practice in organization, to give the student practice in various modes of discourse, and to allow the student to develop a sense of security in his writing. Most students can master the five paragraph theme in all its shapes and can gain self-confidence through that mastery. Our students keep journals. In class we write description, narration, poetry, exposition, and argumentation. We use a variety of stimuli including group interactions and values clarification activities. Students edit their own work and that of others, view and critique classmates' work, practice a variety of short activities, and use slide and tape presentations designed to clarify and eliminate some common writing problems. Grammar, which is part of the CGP and the English Placement Test, is, for the most part, taught in the English Lab.

The English Lab operates as an adjunct to the English classes. Its primary function is to provide special tutoring sessions for students weak in the skills necessary to exit the CGP and score well on the English Placement Test. Each skill is mastered by the student's working through a self-contained learning packet with a tutor. So much for our procedures. What of our results?

Our results in the first two quarters showed that our students placed about the same as the regularly admitted freshmen on the English Placement Test. At the end of the first quarter, our students' survival rate looked very much like an average freshman class. In fact, those students in Eng. 101 did very well. That is what we have accomplished, and I know we can do better. Given the experience of this year, we know how long to keep each student so that he will do well in Eng. 100 or Eng. 101. However, I am not satisfied to do better what we are now doing. I worry about the 40% of our students and the 40% of the regular freshmen who are placed in Eng. 100 and spend 10 weeks working through Correct Writing, a textbook that has nothing to do with writing. What happens during those 10 weeks nags at me. Our students have a sense of writing when they leave us although it is a very fragile sense in some cases. Our students have a positive attitude toward writing. Then they enter the revolving door of Eng. 100.

A few weeks ago I heard Dean Rusk speak at a Phi Delta Kappa banquet.[7] He spoke chiefly of two things: the past 13 years this freshman class has lived through and the future we are asking them to decide. Think of it. When my students were in the first grade, John Kennedy was assassinated, followed by the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. When they were in middle school, I was protesting the war in Viet Nam. When they were in high school, we all suffered through the Watergate years and the moral crisis in government. We have all suffered through many acts of bad faith. Yet it seems to have had a

[7]Phi Delta Kappan Initiation Banquet, Athens, Georgia, February 22, 1977.

very different affect on them than it had on me. War was on TV every night; it was fictionalized. All of the events of the last 13 years seem to have had the same effect on my students as an Andy Warhol movie or a Jasper Johns painting. Warhol's films repeat the same shot over and over. Johns's American flag takes an image so frequently exposed that we have literally become blind to it. Finally, we are forced to <u>really</u> look at the image. The repetition verges on monotony, boredom. For those of us who stay with the image or the event, a new tension results, bringing us back to the basic problem of the relationship between the fiction and the object. We discover that we are indeed blind and that we can be taught to see in a new way. We can synthesize and evaluate, but my students are <u>in</u> the Warhol movie. At the same time that I realize the effects these events have had on me and the world, I'm still teaching in a system that operates with a curriculum written before any of these events took place. In spite of all that has happened in the world, our curriculum still calls for a trite, one dimensional approach to themes. Is this not Prufockian? Will we continue to measure life with coffee spoons? At whatever price? Can we hear the mermaids sing? Dare we start a scene or two? The organization man in his grey flannel suit is descendant of Prufrock. His suit has camouflaged him to the vanishing point.[8] His college English courses force him to conform to one pattern, to one expectation. Look at the future we leave him to decide.

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[8]Wylie Sypher, <u>Loss of The Self in Modern Literature and Art</u> (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 86

Dean Rusk defined this future in terms of the possibility of total nuclear destruction, overpopulation, the depletion of natural resources and food supplies, to name a few. Mr. Rusk said that these freshmen, the ones who normally take the leadership roles and those newly emerging leaders from our developmental classes, will be called upon to make the decisions once left to statesmen-kings. If they approach this task as organizational men or with the cynicisms and lost innocence of their teachers, I am afraid of their decisions. So far, the ones in my classes have responded differently. They are 18 or 19 years old. They still sing lyrics such as:

> Reach out and touch somebody's hand
> Make this world a better place if you can.

They have an intercourse of touch, the Whole Earth vision--a revolutionary vision of the world--a vision of a possible future, a dream--perhaps the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Langston Hughes, or that Shelley implied in Prometheus Unbound: that if we cannot live in dreams, without dreams we cannot live.

How can we best foster this romantic vision--the dreams--our students bring to a composition course? By assassinating the spirit by focusing on their weaknesses instead of their strengths? I worry about the logic behind a remedial course whose premise is that perfect word relationships produce perfect compositions. I worry about a national interest that equates usage with achieving the American Dream. That too is a Prufrockian view. We must ask ourselves if we are content to produce the organization man, the specialists and technicians, insensitive to the dream lost long ago, and trust them with the reasponsibility of choosing

our fate. Rusk implied that these people can no longer solve the problems. If we are not to be reduced to rubble, to a wasteland, we must help our students find and express some vision of absent things, some fictional alternatives to choices that may be final and fatal. The futurists offer another idea. If we project the possibilities of the future and really explore the paths leading to each one, we can perhaps avoid serious mistakes. We must help our students to rediscover the fictions, the events, the objects, the dreams, and the possibilities. This is not simply romantic rhetoric. It is an alternative vision without which management may sterilize our future. Our students, those Special Studies students who will be decision makers, must know that Shelley's vision of man is only a dream; but they must also know that lacking such a dream, we may be doomed. I do not want to end on such a note of cynicism, but with John Keats' version of this romantic faith. He writes, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." This then is the basis, our three R's: revisions, renovations, and revolutions.